



**USAID**  
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

**MALAWI**

# POLICY BRIEF

## Making Integration Work by Creating an Enabling Environment: Lessons from Malawi

The integrated development approach followed by USAID in Malawi, in its Country Development Cooperation Strategy (CDCS) that was approved in 2013, is based on the premise that if development assistance is integrated then development results will be enhanced, more sustainable, and lead to improved quality of life of all Malawians. A stakeholder analysis was conducted in 2015 to examine whether or not the Integration Initiative is taking hold and identify stakeholder perceptions regarding factors contributing to the successes and challenges of carrying out an integrated approach. This brief presents the steps stakeholders reported to have taken to date to integrate and the environment that could facilitate integration.

### USAID/Malawi's Integration Initiative

USAID joins numerous other donors and development practitioners globally in its renewed interest in integration as an approach to programming that could move the community away from siloed, single-sector problem solving to a more dynamic systems approach that honors the complex environment in which development takes place. However, the development community is still grappling with how integration should be defined and operationalized. To that end, USAID/Malawi is asking itself questions such as: Do we need to refine our definition of integration? (Box 1); Will integrated programming help us meet our goal of improving the quality of life of Malawians?; How much integration is enough?; Do activities need to be cross-sectoral to be considered integrated?; Are the three Cs (colocation, coordination, collaboration) all that is needed for integration to occur?; and, if so, what can we do to create an environment to allow for coordination and collaboration to take place?

To help answer these questions, USAID/Malawi commissioned a five-year impact evaluation (IE) of the

Integration Initiative that is accompanied by annual stakeholder analyses (SHA) designed to help the Mission navigate its approach to integration and make course corrections as needed. Recognizing the novelty of its approach, the Mission also opted to use the evaluation as an opportunity to disseminate lessons learned from implementing the Integration Initiative to other missions, USAID/Washington, and the broader development community. This brief honors that commitment, by summarizing key lessons from a 2015 stakeholder analysis conducted with USAID/Malawi, its implementing partners (IPs), local government, and other donors, to examine whether or not the Integration Initiative is taking hold and identify stakeholder perceptions regarding factors contributing to the successes and challenges of carrying out an integrated approach. The evaluation team analyzed the data to construct narratives around the feedback from stakeholders that identified the conditions they felt were necessary for integration to occur. Drawing from the analysis, the brief presents the steps stakeholders reported to take to integrate and the environment or conditions that could facilitate integration.

**Box 1:** In March 2013, USAID/Malawi launched its current Country Development Cooperation Strategy (CDCS) following a stakeholder analysis that demonstrated a challenging cycle where the Government of Malawi (GOM) is not fully capable of providing its citizens with services and citizens are not prepared and able to ask for services. To break this cycle, the CDCS targets one overarching goal, improving the quality of life of Malawians, by implementing integrated cross-sectoral programming and empowering citizens. The integration approach is operationalized using 3 Cs – Colocation, Coordination and Collaboration. USAID/Malawi has targeted three districts - Balaka, Machinga and Lilongwe Rural - to receive the highest concentration of resources to implement health, education, food security, climate change, and economic growth projects while simultaneously receiving support in the form of democracy, rights, and governance (DRG) projects focusing on the decentralization of government by building local governance capacity. While the three districts are now known as full integration districts, USAID/Malawi's integration initiative is not limited to them. The Mission has requested that all of their primary implementing partners (IPs), irrespective of activity location, should integrate activities in order to help the Mission meet its targeted Development Objectives (DOs).

## USAID/Malawi's Steps to Integrate

USAID/Malawi is now in its third year of the CDCS and the second year of the Integration Initiative, and has put in place a process to realize the Integration Initiative. The process begins with a facilitated “match-making” meeting to bring the IPs (both primes and subs) together during a partners meeting to learn about one another’s work. During this time, the IPs are asked to seek out potential opportunities for collaboration with one another with the guidance of USAID staff in attendance (Box 2). Following this facilitated match-making, the IPs follow up with one another to explore potential opportunities in greater detail and decide which integration activities they would like to pursue. In subsequent follow-up meetings they outline the activity, develop a log frame with targeted objectives, and draft a preliminary work plan. Once this process has been completed, they submit their activities to their respective AORs/CORs for approval. Upon approval, they take steps to begin implementing their integration activity/ies.

**IPs see value in integration.** Data from the stakeholder analysis demonstrate an overall increase in the buy-in of the value of the Integration Initiative and that IPs are taking active steps, with the support of USAID/Malawi, to implement integration activities. Specifically, IPs – including those that were awarded contracts prior to the Integration Initiative and those awarded contracts with integration embedded into the contract – are using the definition of integration prescribed by USAID/Malawi, targeting the 3-Cs as their own.

### Box 2: USAID/Malawi Guidance on Identifying Integration Opportunities

**Realize cross-sectoral opportunities:** Leveraging the technical expertise and/or interventions of USAID partners to create synergies in multiple technical areas;

**Lead to added value and results:** Ability to reach a greater number of beneficiaries and realizing opportunities to provide cost savings;

**Reflect a shared purpose:** Sharing a stake in the process and outcome, and accessing a skill or technology not possessed by each individual activity;

**Reflect actions to operationalize integration:** Joint planning, identifying clear roles and responsibilities, and facilitating formal and informal frequent communications during the planning and implementation phases;

**Support district development goals:** Using and strengthening local systems, identifying gaps, challenges, opportunities and aligning activities to district implementation plans/district development plans.

**IPs see inherent benefit of integration.** This was made apparent when they referenced the various outcomes that they expected to come out of integration, including: increased outreach; reduced costs or increased efficiencies; the ability to identify and fill gaps in programming; reduced duplication of activities; and increased capacity, sustainability, and awareness

of other development initiatives. For example, an IP working on an education project wished to implement reading centers run by community-level volunteers in order to help boost literacy rates in the community (in support of the Early Grade Reading Activity project). The IP identified an integration partner that wanted to provide individuals with materials and guidance on how to plant orange-fleshed sweet potatoes in order to improve nutrition in the community. Reading center volunteers were provided with a space they could use and seeds to grow sweet potatoes as incentives. Individuals could only use the land for planting while volunteering at the school. This was designed to encourage participants to be more actively involved in the schools while simultaneously lending them land so they could be close to the school and farm. Taking this approach, both IPs were able to make progress towards their goals of improved literacy and increased nutrition and food security.

---

*“So it is like a double advantage to them; one, they are selecting information about how to grow potatoes using the leaflets. For us, the children in the reading centres together with the volunteers are reading how to work mainly in the part of the children, thereby enhancing the literacy. But at the same time there is the aspect of food security in terms of the volunteers who are to grow potatoes. Which means in our reading centres, and even at school, absenteeism it is going to be reduced. So you see the interconnectivity there.” (Prime IP)*

---

**Challenges to integration remain.** While preliminary findings suggest that there is a desire to integrate and that key stakeholders can see the benefit, not every attempt to integrate has been a success, and there have been challenges encountered along the way. The challenges that stakeholders reported included a lack of consistent guidance from the Mission on the integration definition, need for clarity on measurement of outputs and outcomes, weak communication among collaborators, need for formal agreements among collaborators, difficulty retrofitting integration into pre-existing contracts that preceded the Integration Initiative, and tensions due to imbalances in contributions or commitments and a reluctance to share due to competition amongst stakeholders. Despite these challenges, the stakeholders were optimistic and provided recommendations during data collection to tackle the challenges. This led the evaluation team to construct a narrative around the essential features of an enabling environment for integration that we describe in the remainder of this brief.

## Creating an Enabling Environment for Integration

**Must be a win-win for all parties involved.** In order for an integration activity to move forward and have sufficient buy-in, each activity should be beneficial not solely to a single party, but to all parties involved, including the IPs, USAID, and the host country’s governing bodies (in this case of Malawi, the district government). In other words, it should advance integration outcomes that help partners to reach targeted project-level outcomes. These outcomes should then advance the Mission towards its larger DOs and Goal of improving the quality of life of Malawians.

During the evaluation baseline in 2014 (prior to the implementation of the Integration Initiative), some IPs expressed concern that the implementation of activities could come at great cost and detract from their own initiatives. However, the SHA data indicate that by identifying activities that are win-win, IPs were able to continue towards their goals while integrating, and that the additional time and budget was less than they had anticipated the previous year. In other words, integration is not an end, but rather a means to an end as well as an added value.

**Clear guidance should be given, but with flexibility.** Many stakeholders, including representatives from USAID/Malawi, indicated a desire for additional guidance on how to move integration forward. IPs wanted more guidance from USAID including clear definitions, processes and procedures. A frequent question asked by IPs was, “How much integration is enough?”. Additionally, they also expressed a desire to have a dedicated point of contact at the mission to direct their questions on integration. It was unclear to IPs if there is an individual or group of individuals who serve as Integration Initiative leaders. Several expressed concerns, confirmed by Mission staff, that integration is not implemented consistently across the Mission.

While the IPs and some Mission staff expressed a desire for well-defined parameters, representatives from the Mission who play a key role in the Integration Initiative indicated that, while they understand that there is a need for clear guidance, there also needs to be room for flexibility. Representatives from the Mission stated that they value quality over quantity. This is a slight modification from their initial approach which emphasized occurrence of increased amount of integration. The Mission now emphasizes that IPs should focus on high quality activities rather than just strive for a higher number of integration activities. From their perspective, the goal isn’t how much an IP is integrating, but rather how effective integration is at propelling the Mission towards its overarching goal of improving the quality of life of Malawians.

---

**“...at kind of the initial stages it seemed like there was clear guidance at least from the head office that the integration had to be cross-sectoral and across multiple IPs for it to be truly what was envisioned. That’s not to say other types of integration are bad. But the hope is that we get there where it’s going in that direction. But I wonder if that perspective will change after this stakeholder analysis. Or if the threshold of what we’ll consider really, really good integration will be more nuanced than that.”**  
**(Rep from USAID/Malawi)**

---

**Need rich and robust planning at multiple levels with active USAID involvement.** The planning process provides the opportunity for the IPs to align goals, objectives, and, at times, outcomes that could be complimentary albeit unique, and also the space to think through budgeting and the roles and responsibilities of various individuals involved in the partnership. Some IPs suggested that the processes needed to be formalized such that the planning process would result in a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) amongst the IPs that outlines

roles and responsibilities, budgets/cost-sharing, timeline, and agreed-upon reporting guidelines.

For planning to be effective, USAID should take an active role in the planning process and provide the IPs the space, time, and support needed in order to undertake robust planning on multiple levels and with the guidance of Mission staff. It is necessary for USAID to also work across the various sector offices to ensure that there is alignment in understandings and activities as outlined in the work plans submitted by IPs. Several stakeholders at all levels noted the high importance of bringing integration planning to the district level. To this end, the Mission has recently begun facilitating such district-level cross-sectoral meetings among IPs and sub-IPs. As it currently stands, representatives from district government have stated that they are open and ready for integration, but that they are not being folded into the process. The Mission staff are seeking to increase the levels of integration with key district government representatives over the next year and since the writing of the report, had already initiated a series of meetings.

---

**“If you don’t plan together...if you don’t have the roles and responsibilities clear from the very beginning, and if you haven’t talked about the sensitive issues of resourcing, there are always going to be, I guess what I would consider to be friction. Or conflict. And it’s going to be how to mediate that conflict moving forward. And sometimes, spending the time up front to define boundary conditions is very important and gets you a lot further along in your overall collaboration.”**  
**(Prime IP)**

---

**Need organizational and operational changes within the USAID/Malawi Mission.** What USAID/Malawi is seeking is not the simple implementation of a single integrated activity, but rather a fundamental shift in the way programming is seen and undertaken, so that it can implement holistic programs that cross sectors in order to improve the overall quality of life of Malawians. The Mission’s current organizational structure, which divides the organization by sectors, does not naturally encourage integration. There is a need within the organization for putting organizational structures and practices in place that both allow for and encourage, if not require, staff to work across offices. Current operations that could be revised to accommodate the Integration Initiative include the following:

- Representatives from the various offices to come together across sectors for budget, planning, and agreement on integration activities proposed by implementer. For each proposed integration activity, have representatives cross sectors to discuss and contribute to conversations with IPs to plan reasonable activities and how resources should be allocated across projects.
- USAID sectoral offices to meet more regularly across sectors. This will help to identify potential opportunities for synergies as well as gaps that would need to be filled for an activity to take place. Opportunities identified could be proposed to IPs of existing awards or incorporated into future activities. At USAID/Malawi, newly adopted meetings between

two offices (Health, Population and Nutrition with Sustainable Economic Growth) reflect a step in that direction.

- **Building integration into RFPs and contract requirements.** RFPs could include not only project-level outcomes, but specified integration outcomes that should be targeted. Additionally, RFPs should include language that requires respondents to describe how they will coordinate and collaborate with districts and local officials as well as with other donors and the central government. This is a tactic that USAID/Malawi used once the Integration Initiative was finalized and the new CDCS launched. Therefore, it is reflected in their current RFPs and RFAs.
- **Thinking creatively about contracting.** It can be challenging to modify contracts or current cooperative agreements to require integration. Therefore, as Mission staff work together on existing projects and develop new ones, they may need to consider what type of mechanism they should use that will allow sufficient flexibility to adopt new integration opportunities as they arise and if that will encourage or discourage particular organizations from applying. The Malawi Mission has already started to work to increase flexibility in contracting and the reallocation of resources in order to accommodate integration activities.
- **Develop clear expectations for monitoring and evaluating integration activities, and determine whether there are independent evaluations or assessments that can aid all offices.** IPs are in need of additional guidance on how to monitor progress on integration, and specifically, guidance on “what counts” and “for which partner(s) does it count” as integration, which was raised by IPs in several interviews. In an effort to increase efficiencies, all USAID offices should come together to communicate annual monitoring and evaluation plans, thereby ensuring activities will not be duplicated (such as independent gender assessments or conflict assessments in each sector) and that the Mission can be more targeted in their learning objectives and how to attribute specific outcomes to particular partners.

## Communication as the Foundation “C”

Possibly the most crucial factor in aiding the development and implementation of integrated activities is the use of effective communication. This communication must happen amongst the various technical offices and front office at the USAID Mission; between the Mission and both prime and sub-IPs; amongst the IPs; and between IPs, USAID, and relevant representatives from district government offices. In the cases where effective and regular communication is happening, there is evidence that it is helping reach successful integration outcomes. For example, the meet-

ings that have occurred between the Mission and IPs helped IPs increase their understanding of integration and identify possible partners to develop and implement integration activities. By improving communication, USAID and the partners will continue to reduce duplication, increase efficiencies, and design activities that naturally link with others in the same sector.

***“What I noted was the resistance was coming because at higher level we were able to communicate and share the work plans but the information was not trickled down to the extension workers- those people that are on the ground. So we noted that as a challenge, but after we noted that we were able to communicate to each other, sit down and organize some sort of joint meetings, talk about some of these things and resolve and be able to map the way forward.” (Prime IP)***

## Conclusion

The Integration Initiative in Malawi is progressing well and stakeholders are engaging and buying into the process as integration activities are being identified and implemented. The Mission’s commitment to learning from the process and making necessary changes to continue progress towards its goal is commendable. Sustaining and furthering the progress and success in integrated programming requires the creation of an enabling environment for integration. It is paramount for Mission personnel to work with IPs and with each other to identify win-win opportunities and support efforts to develop work plans that will help benefit all partners involved to enhance development outcomes for Malawians. Furthermore, the Mission should play a crucial role in bringing key stakeholders, including district representatives, together and serve as a conduit for communication, which is a key component of future success. The Mission needs to track the progress of the integration initiative, starting with the examination of whether integration work plans meet certain criteria representing an enabling environment for success to help in the selection of promising opportunities - for example, by developing a checklist for AORs/CORs to use to verify there is a clear “win-win”, that communication has occurred at appropriate levels, and that costs are clearly apportioned between partners. The use of process mapping to illustrate current projects of the IPs alongside how their integration is happening and the development of result frameworks with targets for integration activities could also assist in ensuring that integration is sustained.

**Reference:** Social Impact (2016). Integrated Development in Malawi: Stakeholder Perceptions and Practices. Report approved by USAID/Malawi. Available at [http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf\\_docs/pa00m1x7.pdf](http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/pa00m1x7.pdf)

This Brief is prepared by Social Impact, Inc. under contract number AID-612-C-14-0002 issued by USAID/Malawi to conduct an impact evaluation of CDCS integration hypothesis.

May 2016

[www.socialimpact.com](http://www.socialimpact.com)